

**JAHLF Conference  
Rome – May 21, 2018**

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Witness**

***The gift of life for us***

I'd like to tell you about the first time I heard of Humanae Vitae and how it changed my life.

It was 6 weeks after the birth of my 2<sup>nd</sup> baby. I'd been to the doctors for my post-partum check-up and the doctor asked me what I was intending to do about contraception. I didn't know. So that evening I raised the subject with my husband. It's a conversation that I can recall vividly.

Speaking softly and with great gentleness, my husband dropped a bombshell! He told me about the Church's position on family planning and he explained some of the ethical problems with the various forms of contraception.

This was news to me because I had no idea. I was totally shocked .

Just to illustrate how shocked I was, in my naivety I actually wrote a letter to our Bishop to ask him how come I had never heard of any of this despite being educated at Catholic schools and going through preparation courses for all the sacraments, including Catholic Marriage Preparation. The Bishop sent me a 3-page reply which acknowledged that contraception is a subject that seldom gets spoken of, but the letter said little else.

My husband went on to tell me about Humanae Vitae and shortly afterwards I read it for myself. This was the first papal document I had ever read. It was short and simple and what I saw in it was very surprising. For the first time in my life I saw logic... and it was beautiful... and it totally made sense to me, like something written on my heart.

With hindsight I can see that this was a moment of sacramental grace in our marriage. My husband spoke with all the right words and I had ears to listen. But it was also a turning point in my life, the moment when the scales fell from my eyes. I now had a hunger to learn more about the Catholic faith, to follow the trail of beautiful divine logic I had seen in Humanae Vitae and to discover that logic is the backbone of the teachings of the Church. My husband gave me a copy of the Catechism to look at and again, this was something I had never heard of. I could not believe that there was actually a manual for "How to be a Catholic"!

From here on, I fully embraced the Catholic faith and also my vocation to marriage and motherhood. Prior to this, I had been adamant that I did not want to be a "stay at-home mother" and that I wanted to return to work to pursue the profession I was then dedicated to. That, of course, would have been incompatible with having a large family, which, if I am honest, was something I had not even considered.

I think it is fair to say that up until this point, despite a lifetime of attending Mass, I had no notion of “Thy will be done”. But *Humanae Vitae* gave me a new understanding of living in accordance with God’s will and a new vocabulary with which to express myself. I now had a heightened sense of my own God-given dignity - as a unique individual, as a woman and as a mother. And in our marriage, I could now say we were “free and responsible collaborators of God the Creator”, that we could be “open to new life” and “open to God’s plan for our marriage and our family”.

We were living away from our families at this time but immediately God placed people in my path who would help me to understand more about the Church’s teachings on marriage and family life. These included a group of Billings teachers; members of the pro-life movement, and most inspiring of all, a young Catholic family with 5 children. This was the first larger than average family I had encountered and their *joie de vivre* was contagious! I’m certain that it was also no coincidence that it was about this time that I discovered the traditional Latin Mass and the Rosary, both essential nourishment for my vocation.

As each beautiful new child arrived I learnt in a very real way that our love was not further divided. It was multiplied, like God’s love for us.

Then in the 6<sup>th</sup> year of our marriage we learnt that being open to new life and to open God’s plan also means being open to suffering and to death. Being open to the full drama of human life. Our 5<sup>th</sup> baby miscarried at 14 weeks. We were both devastated. But we found God in our suffering. And our young children were moved to ask questions about where the baby had gone, which led to unexpected opportunities to transmit the faith to them and to pray together. Sadly, we went on to lose another baby in 2014 with near fatal consequences for me.

As our family has grown, so too have the sacrifices required of us. Life is very busy and often physically tiring. I am sure that the practical realities and difficulties of having a larger family will be obvious and known to many of you. And modern life is expensive, especially for a single income family in an economy that is geared towards smaller families with 2 household incomes. My dream of having a sporty little car is the distant dream of a different woman. Our 10-seater minibus, on the other hand, is a very visible “sign of contradiction” in the current culture!

Being a visible sign of contradiction is probably the most obvious way in which we witness to *Humanae Vitae*. We obviously look different to average families and this often causes looks and sometimes comments. On the whole these comments are positive and born out of curiosity. I often find women are quick to tell me that they would have liked to have more children - but didn’t. Occasionally though, people can be very rude and feel at liberty to ask us crude and personal questions.

I try to remember that all encounters are an opportunity to evangelise and show people a different way of living. A way of living that is extraordinary in our current culture, but that needn’t be extraordinary and indeed was very ordinary 50-60 years ago.

Sadly, but perhaps not surprisingly, it is amongst the mainstream Catholic community that I have felt the most hostility. In UK parishes our family stands out a mile. Negative comments to me have included “oh no, not another one”; “don’t you want to do something of economic value with your

life?" and most hurtfully from one enlightened Catholic, that we are perpetuating a historic stereotype of Catholics as an ignorant underclass who breed like rabbits.

I am also sorry to say that I have experienced hostility from some priests. I was once told in the confessional that it wouldn't be a problem if I used contraception and there are more important things to worry about.

That said, there *are* some supportive clergy out there but they are thin on the ground and I have only met a handful with the necessary formation, experience and willingness to help married couples to live out their vocation. We all know that 50 years of silence on this subject has been catastrophic. But for those couples who are living *Humanae Vitae*, there is a real need for spiritual direction and support. If I can give an example, many couples would benefit from spiritual direction to help them discern the "grave reasons" for using NFP.

I do understand that many priests feel that as celibates, it is not their place to speak on this issue. But they must! Just as men must have a voice in the abortion debate. Priests must have a voice on the subject of the transmission of human life. The future of humanity depends on it!

As I approach the end of my child-bearing years, I realise it has been an isolating experience. Social media has been a real God-send and many Catholics have found it an invaluable way of connecting. In the UK we have a very vibrant online Catholic Mothers group that I am part of. I am very pleased to say that through it I have encountered many young Catholic women who are just starting out on their journey as Catholic Mothers and they display a new vigour and a real determination to fully practice the faith in accordance with the Church's teachings and rebuild the civilisation of love. They are a great sign of hope for the future!

This is my testimony, and with the help and example of Mary my Heavenly Mother, I shall keep on going!

Sarah Ward

May 2018